

***Successes, Failures, and CRP Management Needs for Open Land Birds  
by Randy Rodgers, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks***



**With the steady intensification of agriculture, it should be obvious why wildlife interests have committed so many eggs to the Conservation Reserve Program basket.**

**In 2002, I surveyed 20 states to determine the effect CRP had on prairie grouse: sharp-tailed grouse, greater prairie chickens, and lesser prairie chickens. I'd like to focus first on the lesser prairie chicken which is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.**



Ron Spomer Photo



**From the beginning of the CRP, we've seeded primarily mixtures of native grasses in Kansas.**



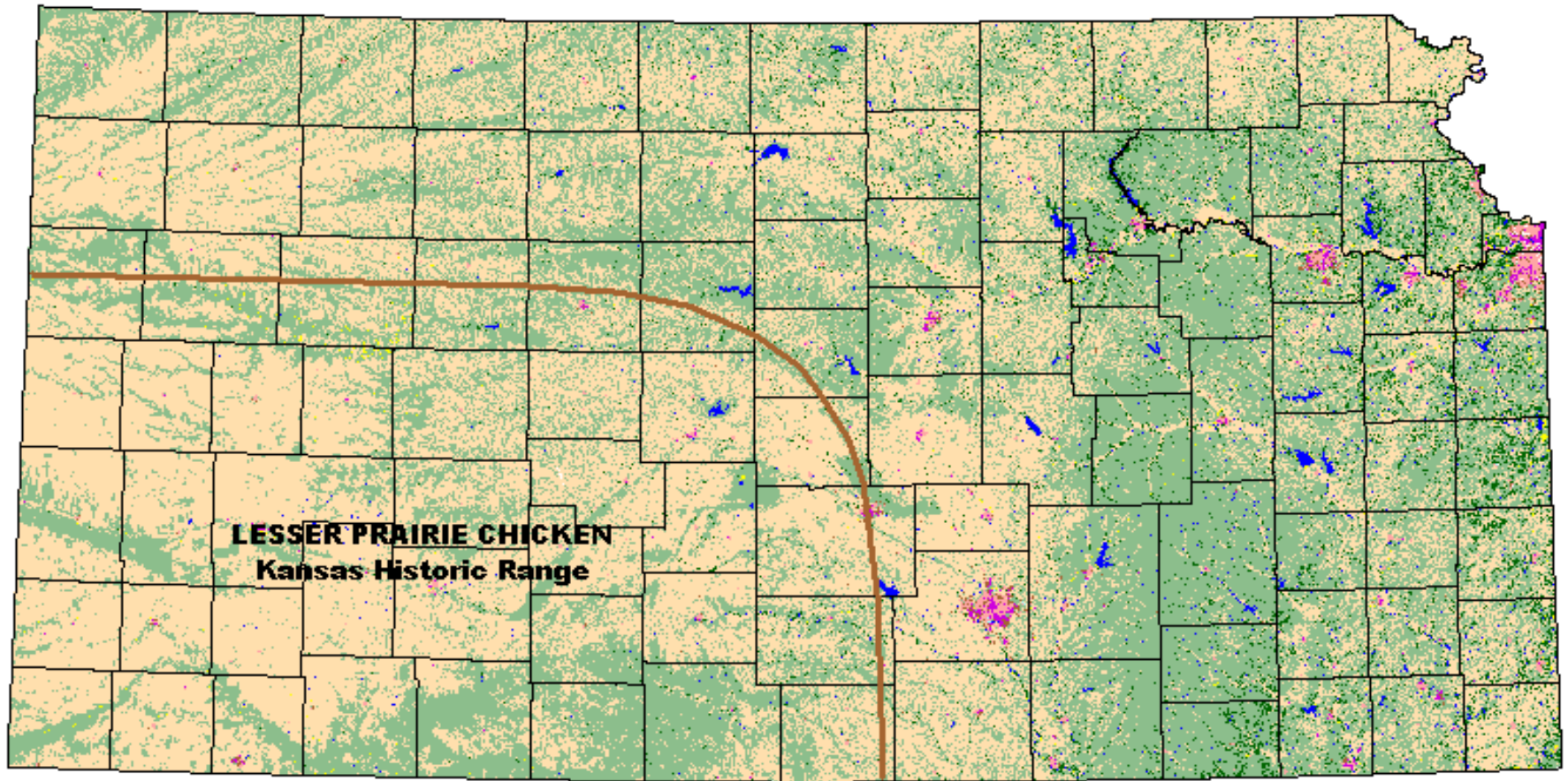


**In Western Kansas, wherever those stands have occurred in close proximity to native range, prairie chickens have benefited . . . Particularly the lesser prairie chicken.**



# ***Historic Range***

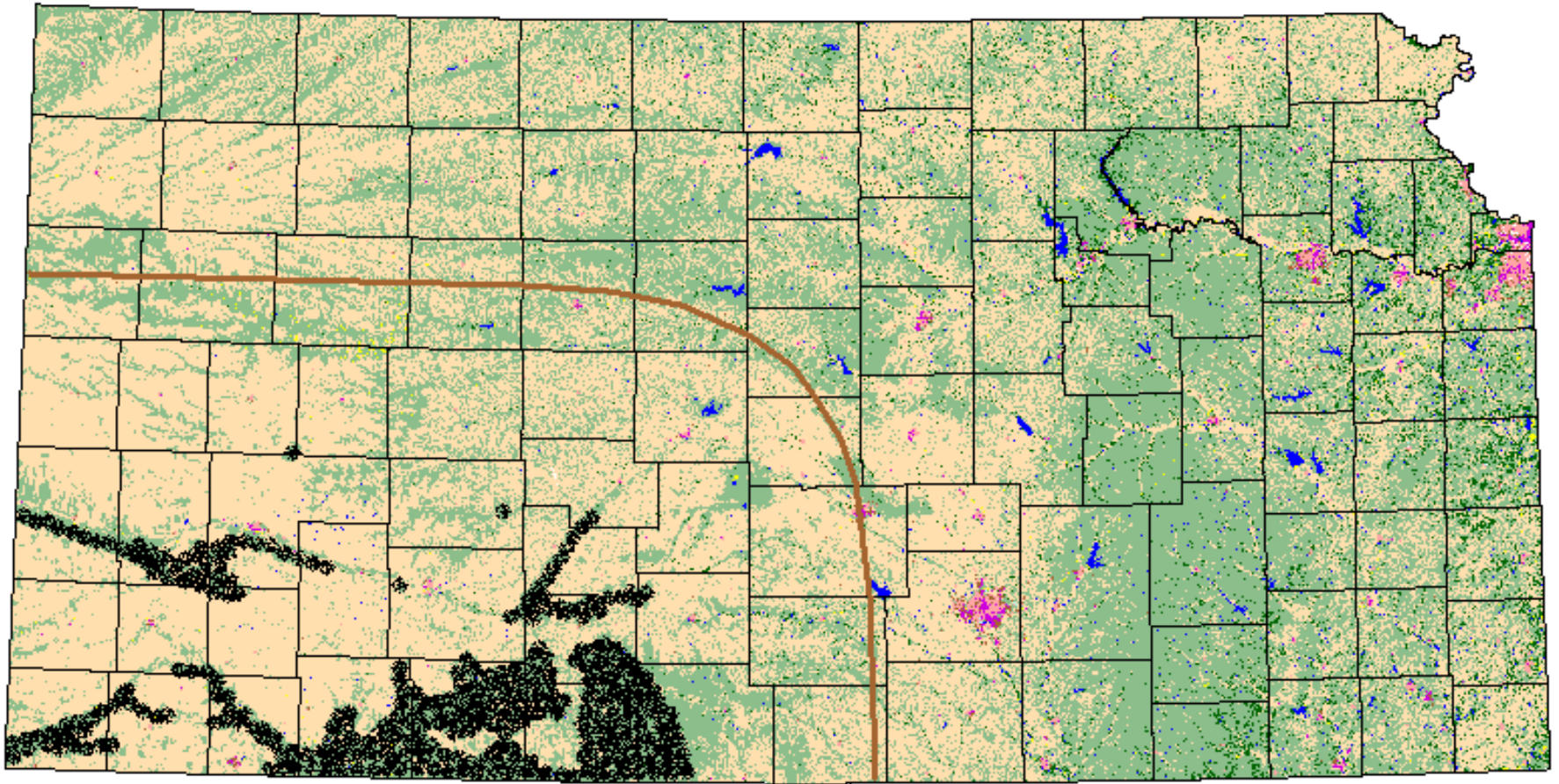
## ***Lesser Prairie Chicken in Kansas***



**This is the historic range of the lesser prairie chicken in Kansas.**



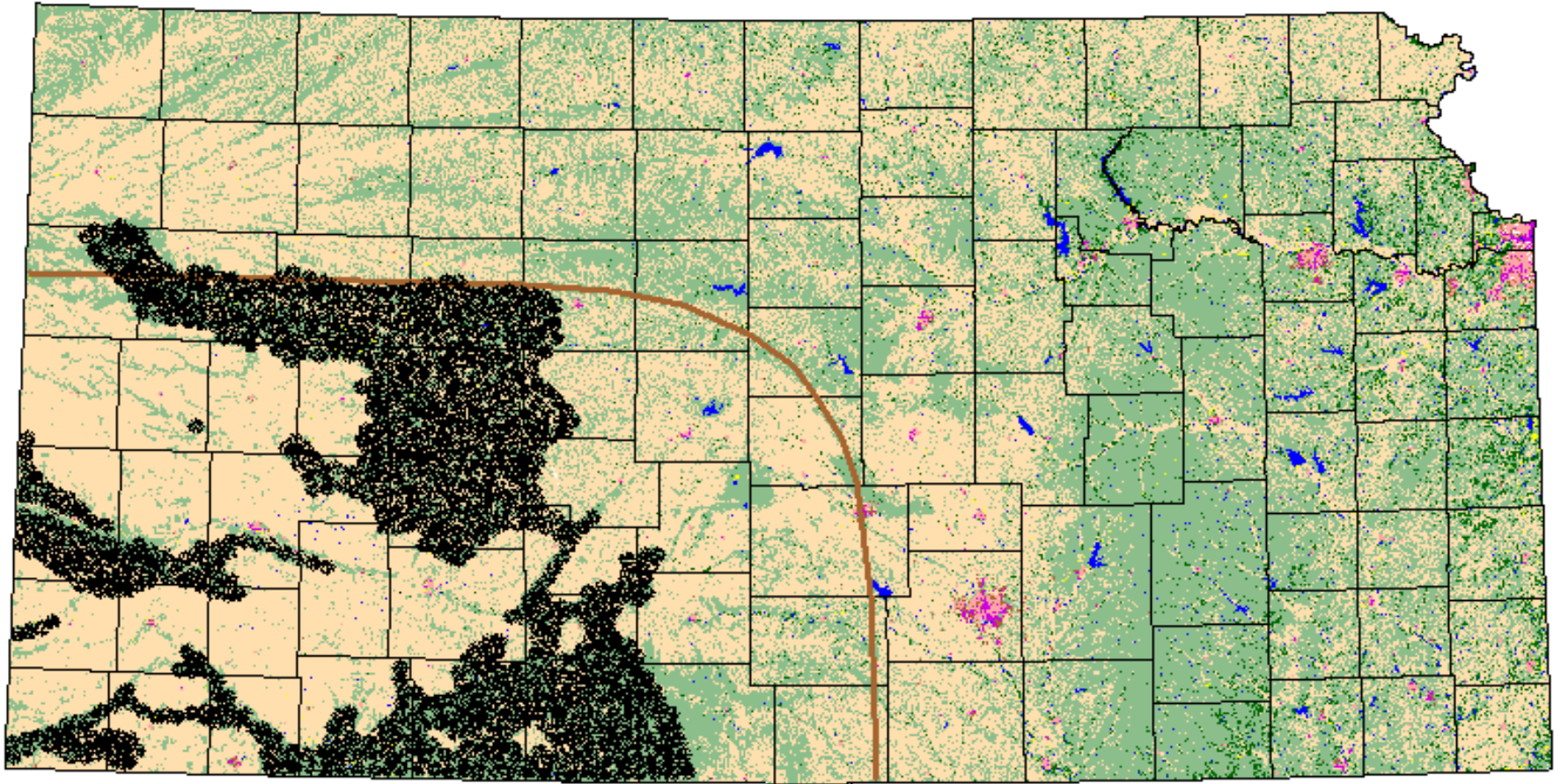
# ***Pre-CRP Range Lesser Prairie Chicken in Kansas***



**By the late 1970's, they were down to this.**

# ***Current Range***

## ***Lesser Prairie Chicken in Kansas***



**With CRP, their range in Kansas has expanded tremendously. It's no exaggeration to say that CRP has played a major role in keeping them off the ESA list . . . a good thing.**





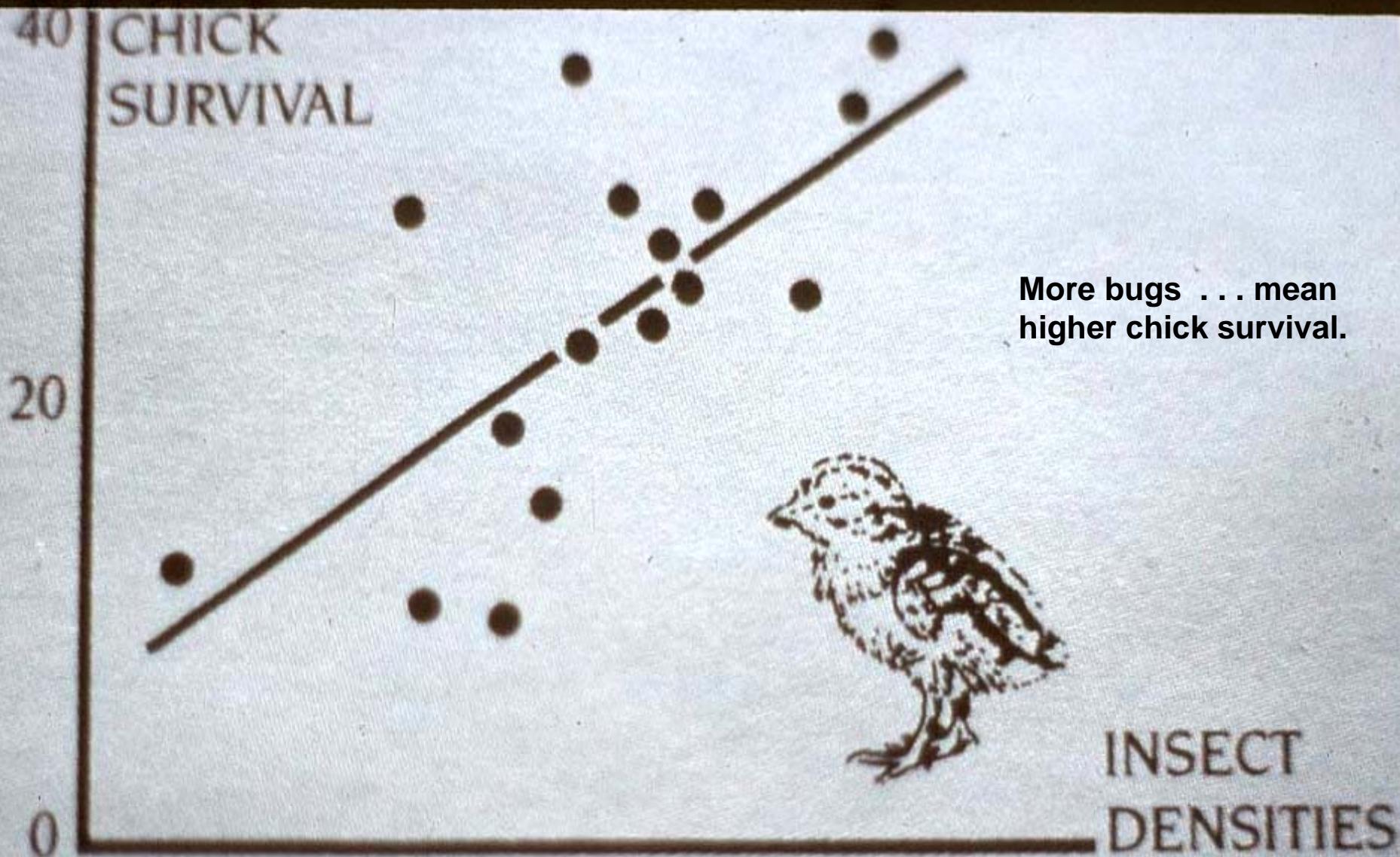
**Greater prairie chickens have expanded their range as well. Now, for the first time in about 80 years, the ranges of these two species have come together in western Kansas.**





**Let's also consider the needs of this chick. For about the first two months of it's life, it eats almost nothing but bugs . . . It has to have them . . . Can't live without them.**





CHICK SURVIVAL IS DIRECTLY  
RELATED TO INSECT DENSITIES

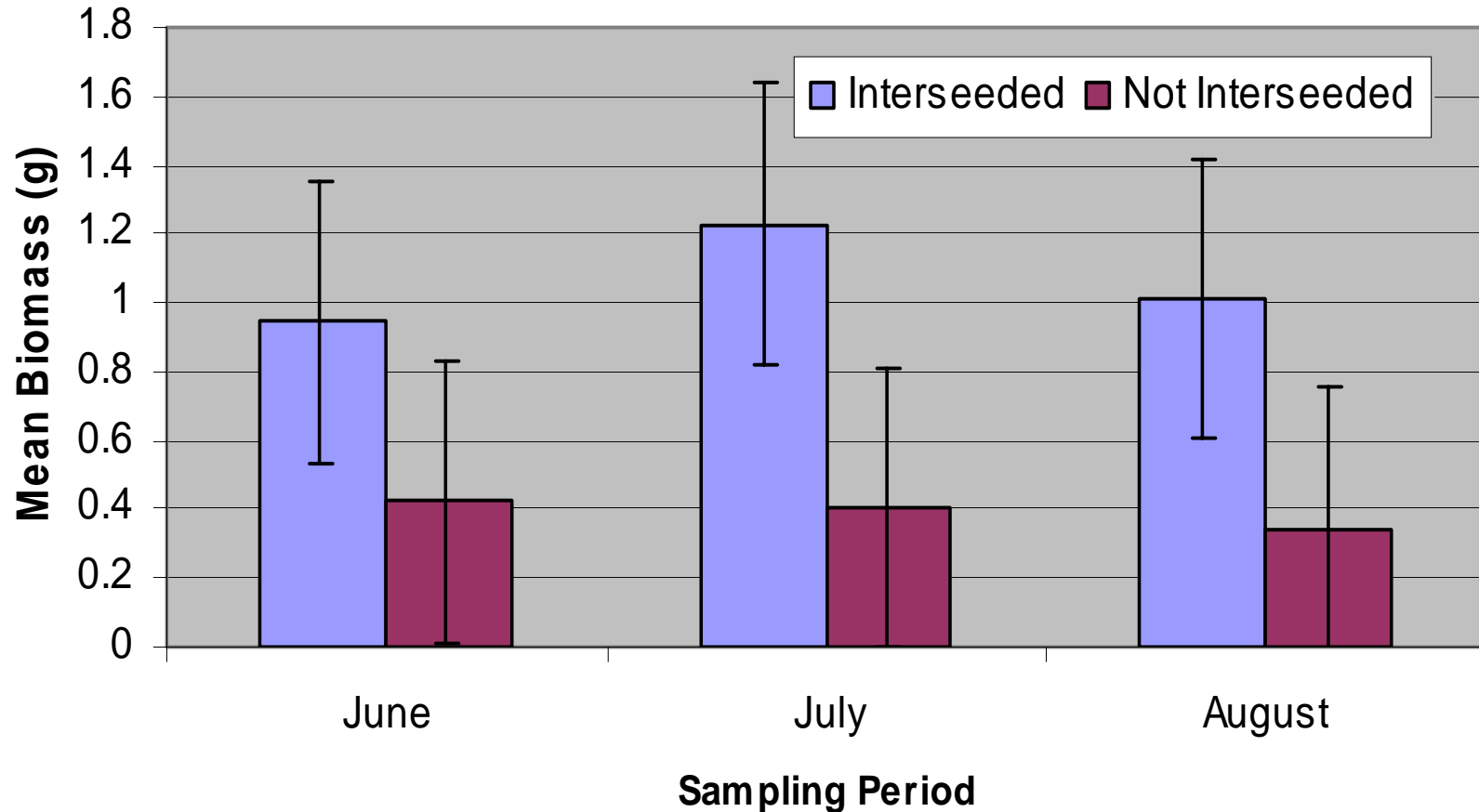


**By including forbs in CRP plantings, chick habitat quality is improved; both in new seedings and in enhancements, like this alfalfa interseeding. Alfalfa has proven to be one of the best plants to improve stand quality for broods..**





## Mean Invertebrate Biomass (g) of Interseeded Fields vs. Fields Not Interseeded



**These are the results of sampling paired interseeded and non-interseeded CRP stands in western Kansas. Successful alfalfa interseeding increased bug availability almost 3-fold. Forbs also increased invertebrate diversity, including beneficial predatory arthropods.**



I have concerns with rules being enforced for “native restorations”. . . CP25. This is slimflower scurfpea (also called “wild alfalfa”). It may be the most abundant forb of native prairie in western Kansas. To establish grassland that resembles native prairie, this plant should be included. But the seed is not available . . . You can’t buy it.

***Slimflower Scurfpea***  
***“Wild Alfalfa”***



**Alfalfa has a similar growth form. It's non-invasive, inexpensive, understood by producers, and it's highly desired by native wildlife. But alfalfa is non-native, so it's not permitted in CP25 plantings. The consequence . . . we can't, under current rules, establish a CP25 habitat that closely resembles native prairie. . . . A very small quantity of alfalfa (0.1 lb/acre) in these mixes would create habitat more beneficial to native wildlife.**



***Alfalfa***



**Compare, for example, this native sandsage prairie pasture . . .**



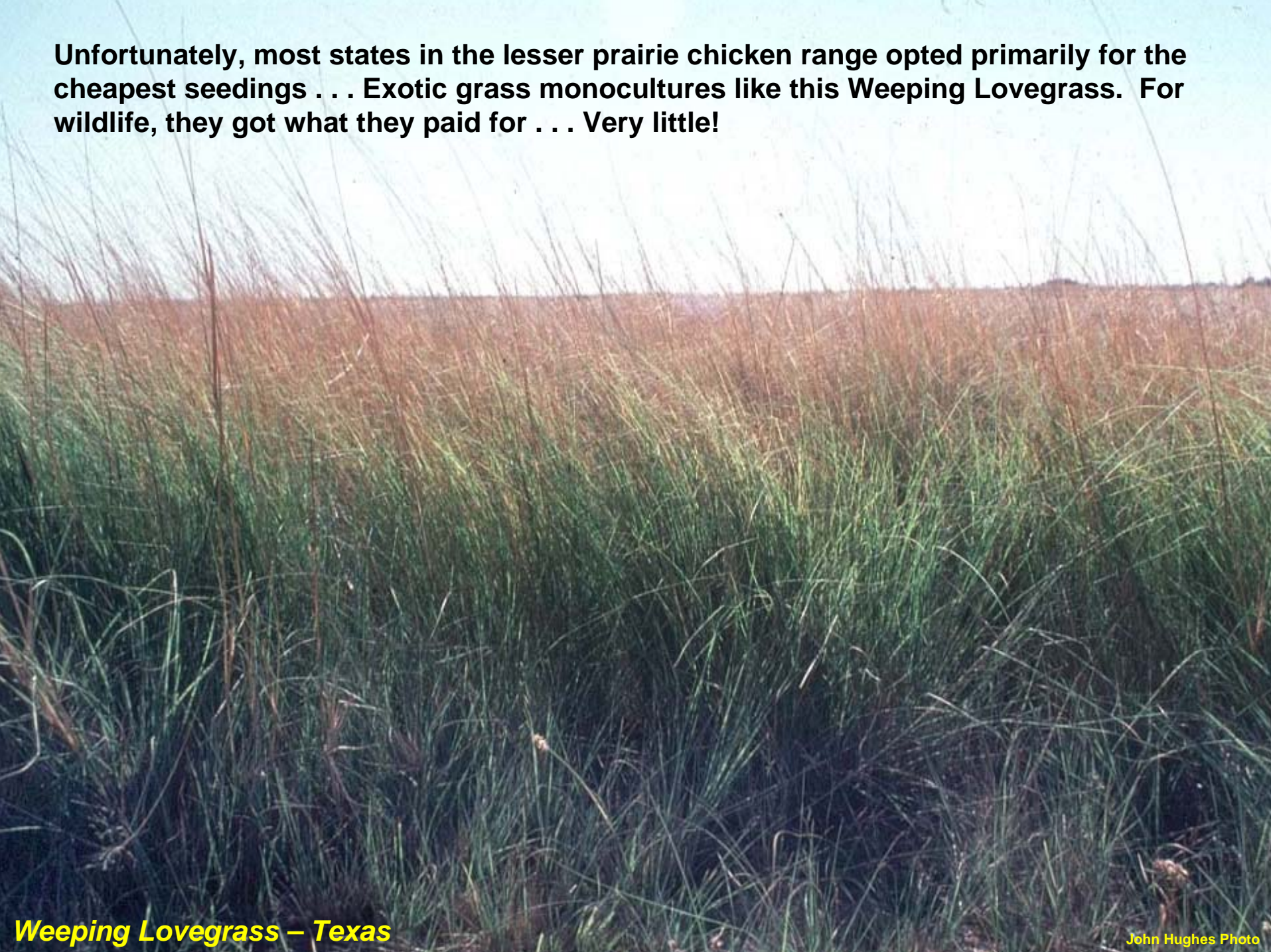


**. . . To this CRP stand (CP2) that contains a small amount of alfalfa.**





**Unfortunately, most states in the lesser prairie chicken range opted primarily for the cheapest seedings . . . Exotic grass monocultures like this Weeping Lovegrass. For wildlife, they got what they paid for . . . Very little!**



***Weeping Lovegrass – Texas***



**Some gains for greater prairie chickens have occurred in Minnesota, Missouri, and the Northern Great Plains. These gains have been less than hoped for . . .**





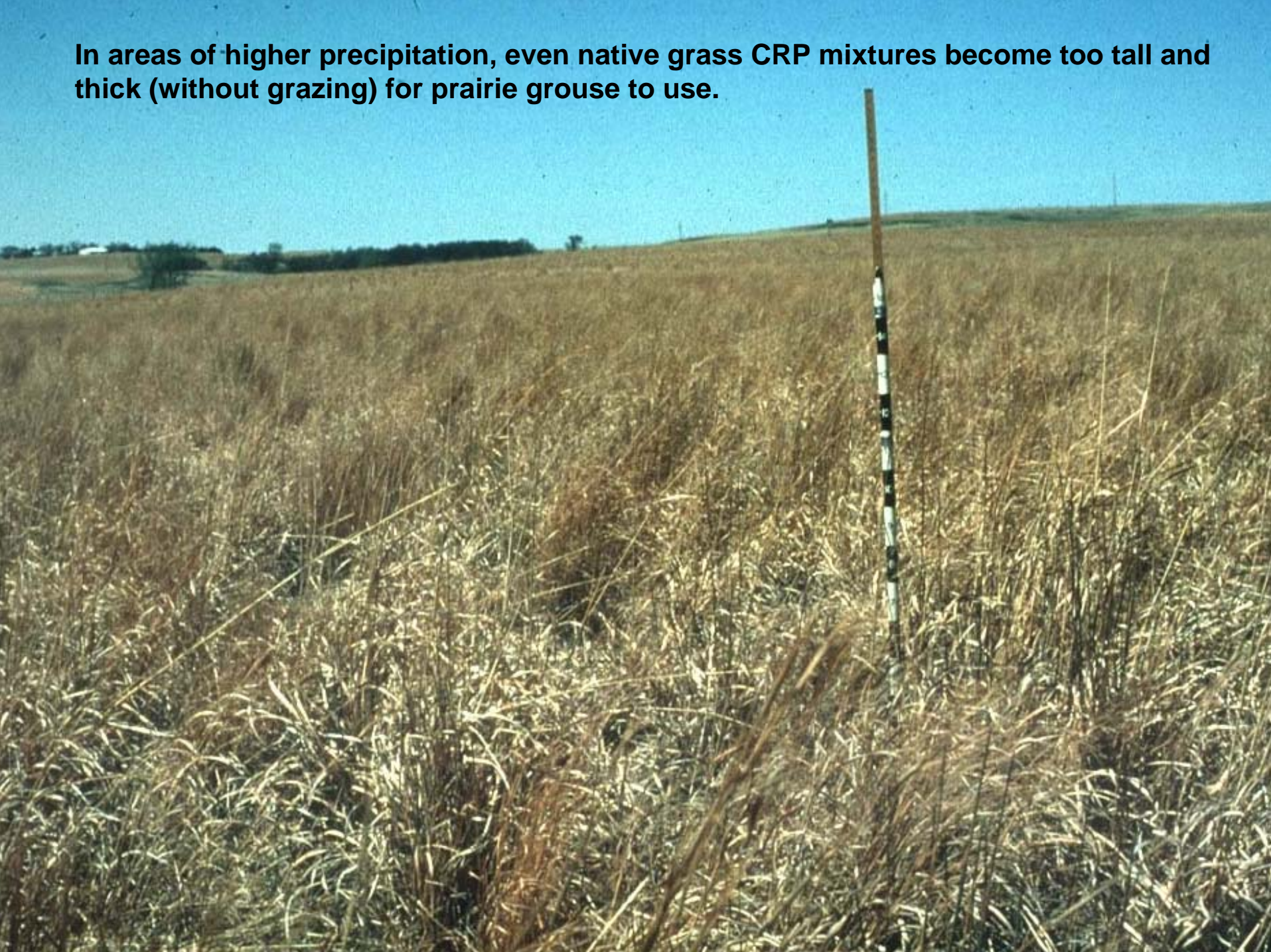
**. . . because much of this CRP was seeded to aggressive grasses like smooth brome or tall fescue, both of which tend to crowd out forbs.**



***Smooth Brome – Missouri***



**In areas of higher precipitation, even native grass CRP mixtures become too tall and thick (without grazing) for prairie grouse to use.**





**Sharp-tailed grouse, including the ESA candidate Columbian subspecies, have benefited greatly from CRP . . .**





**. . . If seed mixtures included forbs. Sharptails particularly benefited, if mixtures included alfalfa, as seen in this Idaho stand.**





**But again . . . Exotic monocultures, like this crested wheatgrass, did not provide much benefit to sharptails.**



***Crested Wheatgrass – Idaho***



**It's not only what you plant . . . It's how you manage. Failure to manage grassland CRP has allowed invasive trees, like eastern red cedar . . .**



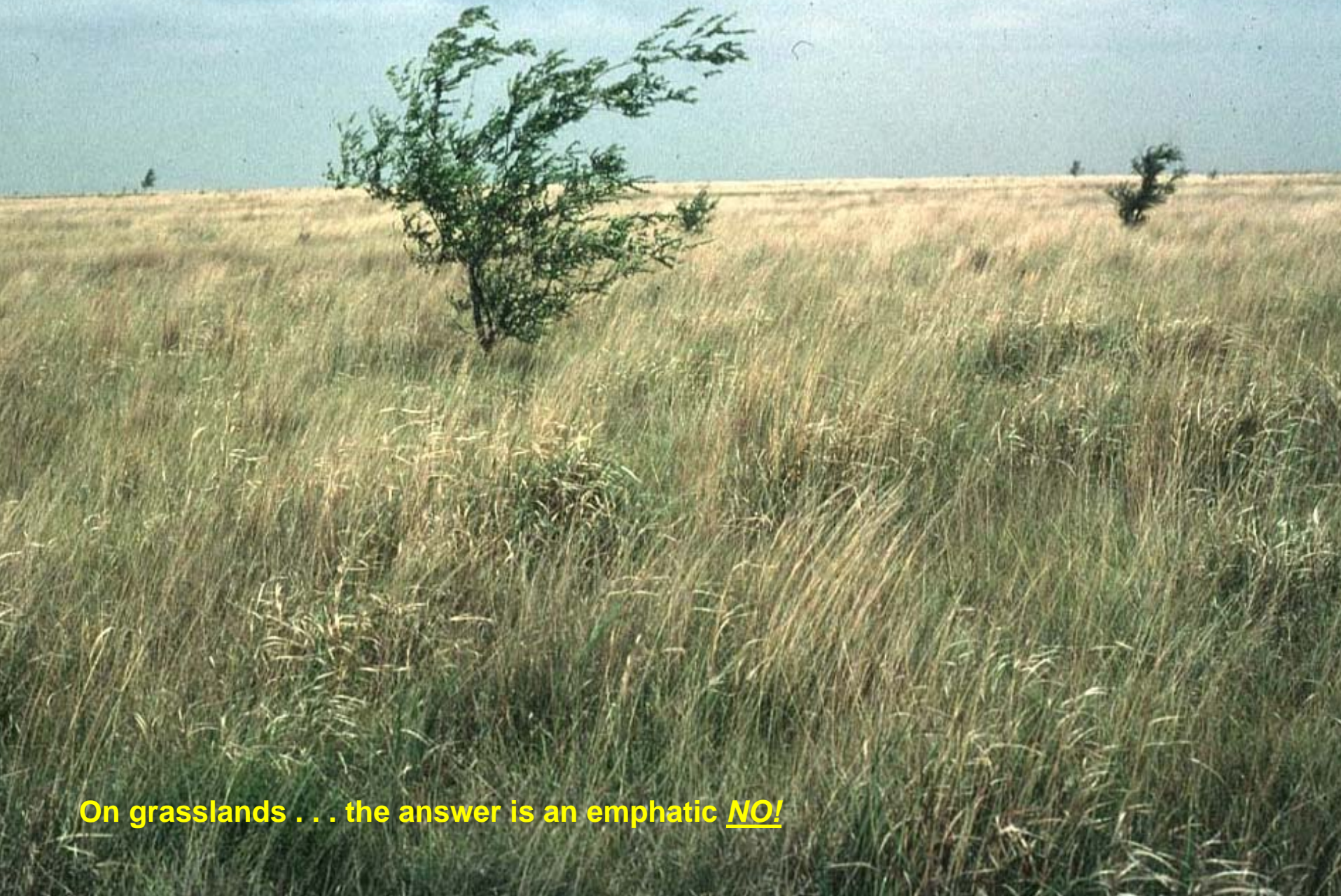


. . . Russian Olive . . .





... and a hodgepodge of other species to infest far too many tracts. ... So what's the big deal? ... Aren't trees a good thing?



On grasslands ... the answer is an emphatic NO!



**Trees  
become  
perches  
for hawks  
and owls  
from which  
they can  
hunt  
open land  
birds.**



**Many species of grassland birds avoid areas with trees, even if the grassland habitat is, otherwise, good.**





**Research done in northeastern Colorado showed significantly higher mortality of hen pheasants that nested within 600 meters of tree plantings than of hens that nested further away. And the culprit was . . .**



...  
the  
Great  
Horned  
Owl



**Don't get me wrong . . . I like raptors. But raptor numbers are generally increasing . . . while grassland birds are declining.**





**Trees also increase nest predators like crows . . .**



... magpies ...



Mike Blair Photo







... and raccoons





**Small grassland birds, like this grasshopper sparrow,  
must contend with yet another threat . . .**



**Tree invasion benefits the  
brown-headed cowbird.  
This bird is a nest parasite.  
It lays its eggs in other  
birds' nests . . .**





**. . . as you see in this photo. Trees provide cowbirds elevated perches from which they can locate grassland birds' nests. The effect of such nest parasitism is often reduced nestling survival of the host species.**





**Trees also change the open nature of grassland landscapes. In Minnesota, hybrid poplar were planted as CRP in, otherwise, open areas . . . in at least one case, on an existing sharp-tailed grouse dancing ground. Prairie grouse, and other grassland birds, need open landscapes. Plantings like this fragment such landscapes.**





**In Kansas, Eastern Red Cedar has often been planted on CRP grasslands. This has the effect of limiting proper management of the grass, since it is now more difficult to use controlled fire or managed grazing.**





**Without management, cedar begins  
to spread into the grassland.  
The grass stand becomes  
decadent, accumulating  
excessive dead litter.**







**We need to encourage controlled burning . . .**





**. . . Not only for tree control . . . But also to benefit young wildlife.**





**Without fire, or other management, CRP grassland often becomes too thick at ground level.  
This is a wall to a 3-inch tall chick.**





**After a burn, open pathways are created that allow easy chick movement.**



**One of the best ways to encourage controlled burning is to encourage clean firebreaks. Firebreaks add a great margin of safety to any controlled burn.**



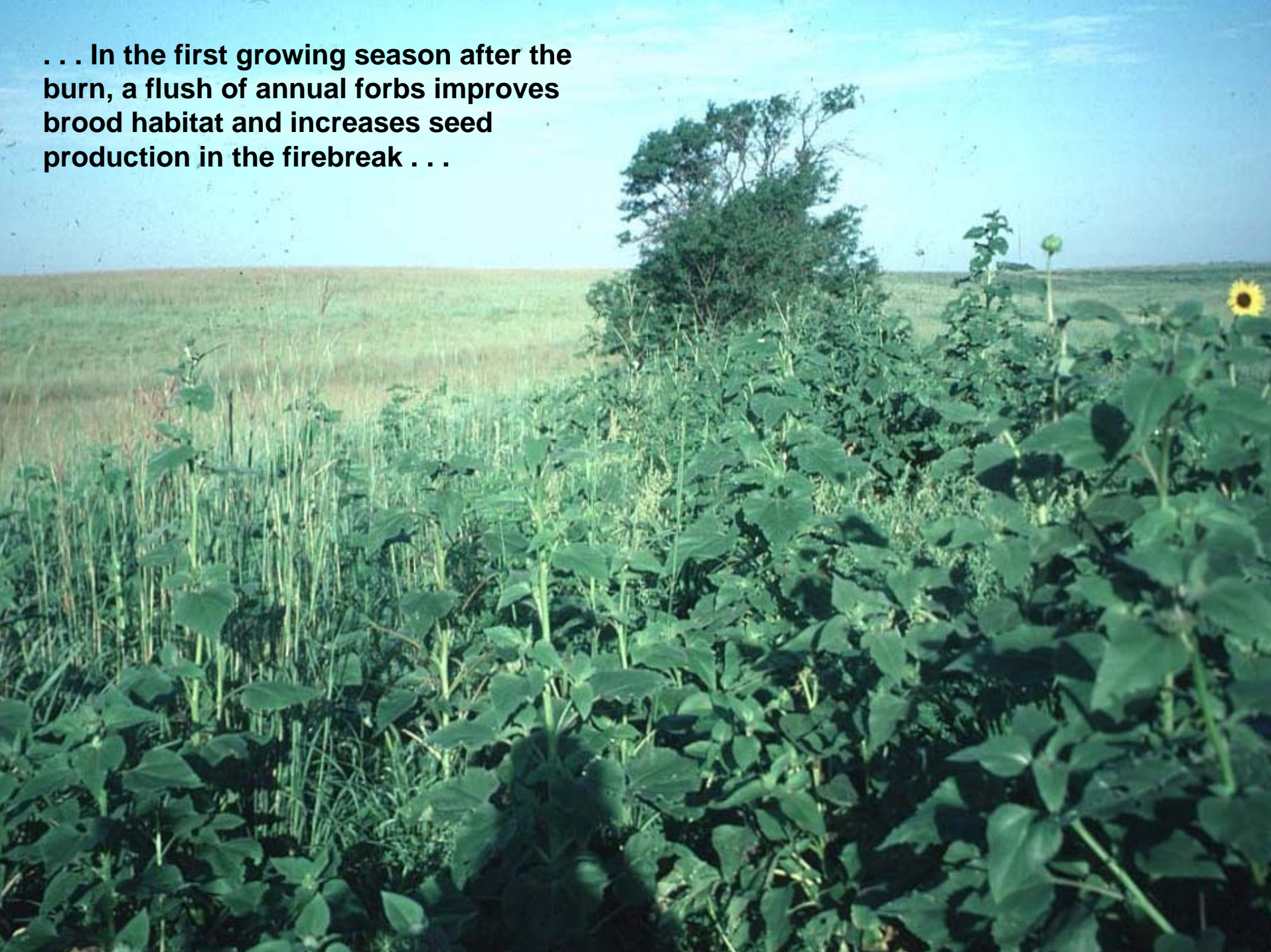


**Heavily disked firebreaks will  
not harm the CRP grass . . .**





**. . . In the first growing season after the burn, a flush of annual forbs improves brood habitat and increases seed production in the firebreak . . .**





**. . . After two growing seasons, the CRP grass stand is fully recovered.**





***To Summarize: • Avoid Aggressive Monocultures***



***Old World Bluestem – Oklahoma***



- ***Forbs Are Beautiful***

**Forbs are not just beautiful.  
They provide the habitat  
structure and insects  
that chicks require.**





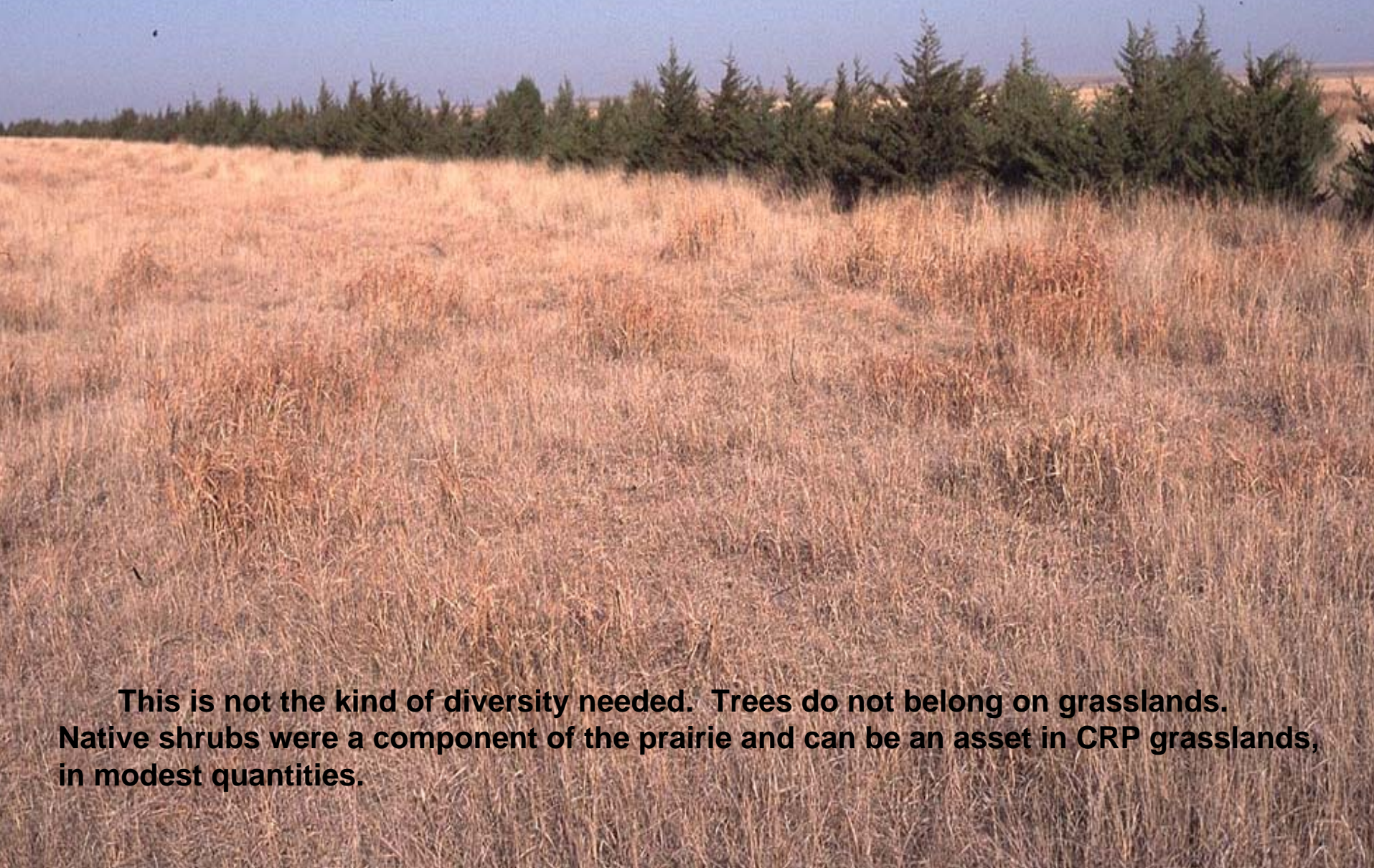
- ***Diversity is Good***

Plant species diversity, in turn, provides height diversity and structural diversity in the stand.





- ***Don't Plant Trees on Grassland CRP***
- ***Native Shrubs – OK***



**This is not the kind of diversity needed. Trees do not belong on grasslands. Native shrubs were a component of the prairie and can be an asset in CRP grasslands, in modest quantities.**



- ***Control Invasive Trees***
- ***Required for Re-enrollment***

**We must control invasive trees. This should be a requirement for CRP re-enrollment.**





- ***Use Controlled Fire***
- ***Clean Firebreaks***

Occasional controlled burning is a good thing. Clean firebreaks are a great way to improve safety and increase peoples' comfort level.







**“Mother Nature was at her  
worst Sunday,  
whipping winds up to 60 mph  
– the dust-filled skies  
nearly blotting out the sun.”**

**Mike Corn, Hays Daily News  
April 19, 2004**

**Steve Hausler Photo**

**I’d like to touch on one other topic . . . For several years, the High Plains have experienced some serious dust storms. This photo was taken 100 mile east of the storm. I recognize the Continuous Signup CRP emphasis on riparian buffers and water quality . . . but . . .**



**. . . Wind causes serious erosion too.  
Should you think this is just an isolated  
area . . .**



***Trego County, Kansas 5/29/04***

**“Dust Storm Wreaks Havoc Across Region”**

**Joy Leiker, Hays Daily News, June 1, 2004**





. . . Here's the same storm in a different place  
over 70 miles away from the previous slide.

*Thomas County, Kansas 5/29/04*



- ***Cross Wind Trap Strips***
- ***Just 667 Acres . . . Nationwide!***



Continuous Signup CRP has some great buffer practices, like Cross Wind Trap Strips, to combat wind erosion. They're ideal "Working Lands Conservation." . . . But they're not working . . . Because we can't sell them. This practice is applicable to semi-arid regions of the High Plains and the Northwest, but only 667 acres are installed.

Much of the reason for this shortcoming is the impracticality of FSA rules regarding winter grazing. With wind strips, incidental winter grazing is not permitted at all and fencing is impractical. Even when allowed with some CCRP practices, most producers will not accept that they must first get permission from FSA just to graze corn or sorghum stalks over winter. For the small acreage involved, getting permission is . . . *too much hassle*. Many farmers lose all interest in buffers when they hear the existing FSA grazing restrictions.

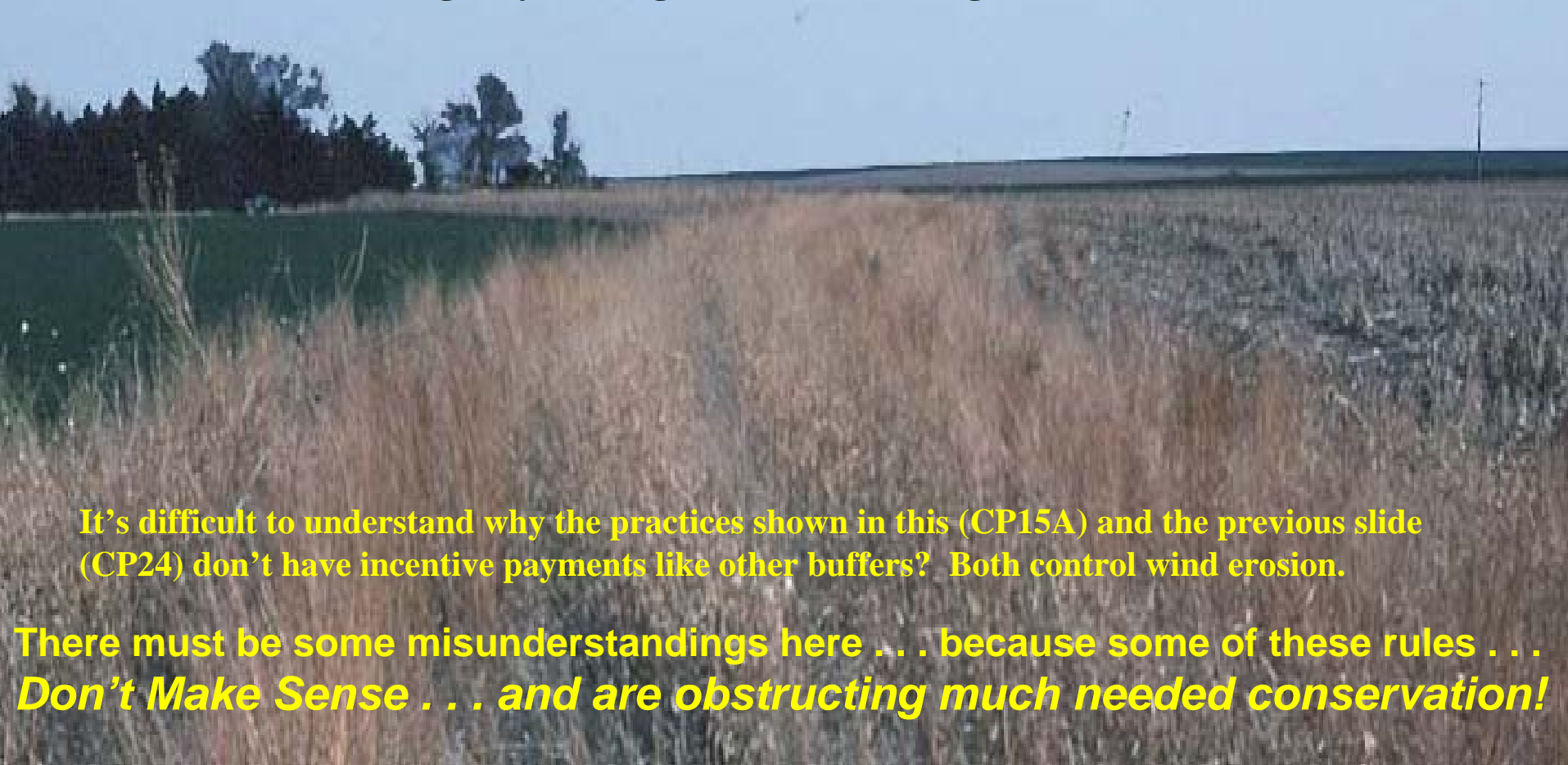


# ***Incidental “Grazing?”***

Even the phrase - “Incidental Grazing” is a misnomer.

**During winter, cattle won’t harm these buffers. . . . What cow in her right mind would graze this coarse, dormant grass when she has more palatable crop residue to eat? . . . And why is it that it’s OK (with FSA permission) for a cow to be on this grassed terrace if she’s grazing these sorghum stalks, but she’s in violation of FSA rules if she crosses over and nibbles this green wheat (the issue was recently partly corrected after 6 years of asking)? Winter grazing of green wheat is a common practice on the Southern Plains.**

**. . . I can think of no reason why winter grazing of crop residue or green wheat should require FSA permission or payment reduction for most buffers. If anything, a little hoof action will benefit the longevity and vigor of the buffer’s grass stand.**



**It’s difficult to understand why the practices shown in this (CP15A) and the previous slide (CP24) don’t have incentive payments like other buffers? Both control wind erosion.**

**There must be some misunderstandings here . . . because some of these rules . . .  
*Don’t Make Sense . . . and are obstructing much needed conservation!***



**The CRP  
is a  
Great Program**



**If we can just work together to straighten out a few of its flaws . . .**

**It'll make a lot of folks happy!**